

Radical Atheism: Jean Meslier in Context

Dr Charles Develennes

Abstract

Jean Meslier (1664-1729) is a largely forgotten figure of intellectual history. There are good reasons to rehabilitate his thought in English-speaking scholarship, as he was a radical thinker, claiming the label of atheism for the first time in modern thought, and putting forward an egalitarian political thought. Based on a proto-utilitarian doctrine and an Enlightenment belief in the power of reason over faith, Meslier put together a devastating critique of religious thought in his *Memoirs*. But Meslier the atheist was turned into a deist by Voltaire, who edited his works in the 1760s, drastically cutting any references to his political thought in the process. Meslier the radical, in other words, was too extreme for Voltaire the moderate. Jonathan Israel's thesis about two poles of the Enlightenment is here particularly helpful in reframing Meslier's political thought, and rescuing him from the communist readings of the 1960s. Meslier is best thought of as a radical republican, advocating universal, equal, and democratic rights for all.

The Author

Charles Develennes is a Lecturer in Political and Social Thought at the University of Kent. He works in the fields of the history of political thought, political theory, and international theory. He is currently working on strands of atheism in France in the eighteenth century, the critical theory of Pierre Bayle, contemporary theories of atheism, secularism, and toleration, and new materialisms. He has published in *History of Political Thought*, with forthcoming articles in *Telos*, *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, and the *Journal of International Political Theory*.

English-language readings on Meslier include:

Michael Buckley, *At the origins of modern atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

Jonathan Israel, *Enlightenment Contested. Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670-1752*. (Oxford: OUP, 2006).

Jean Meslier, *Testament. Memoir of the Thoughts and Sentiments of Jean Meslier* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2009).

Andrew Morehouse, *Voltaire and Jean Meslier* (New Heaven: Yale University Press, 1936).

Michel Onfray, 'Jean Meslier and "The Gentle Inclination of Nature",' *New Politics*, 10, 4, (2006).